

**R.M. PATTERSON: A LIFE OF GREAT ADVENTURE.**

By DAVID FINCH. Calgary: Rocky Mountain Books, 2000. 304 p. maps, b&w illus., endnotes, chronology, index. Hardbound. Cdn\$34.95.

Almost anyone who has ever dreamed of putting a canoe in water north of 60° has heard of the famous South Nahanni River, which flows into the Liard River near the boundaries between British Columbia, the Yukon, and the Northwest Territories. The Nahanni region was designated a National Park Reserve in 1976, and perhaps no single person was more responsible for that event than R.M. Patterson, author of *The Dangerous River* (1954). The *D.R.*, the nickname by which Patterson's popular book is often known among canoe enthusiasts and armchair travellers, recounts the author's adventures on the Nahanni during the years 1927, 1928, and 1929. With little more river experience than what he had gained punting on the Cherwell during his undergraduate days at Oxford, Patterson found himself tracking and poling a 16-foot Chestnut Prospector canoe up the Liard River to Nahanni Butte before turning up the mystery-shrouded South Nahanni River. He spent the summer ascending the river as far as the magnificent Virginia Falls, although at the time Patterson reached them, they were still unnamed. Patterson himself always referred to them as "The Falls of the Nahanni," a name at once more simple and more grand. During that adventurous summer, he met Albert Faille, an accomplished canoeman and solitary trapper who would probably have remained unknown but for Patterson's account of him in *The Dangerous River*. No doubt as a direct result of his role in Patterson's book, Faille later became the central subject of the 1962 National Film Board documentary *Nahanni*.

By freeze-up in 1927, Patterson had left the Nahanni, but only until he could plan his return. That winter, he made a brief trip to England, where he was engaged to be married, but he was back in Canada by February 1928. Immediately, he began to arrange his return to the Nahanni as soon as spring breakup would allow, this time with a companion and with supplies for a winter's sojourn. The stories of those adventures on the Nahanni, however, are Patterson's to tell, and he tells them with extraordinary skill, vigour, and *joie de vivre*. To anyone with even an inkling of romance left in his or her soul, *The Dangerous River* is a "must read," although I suspect few will have missed it.

Now, however, a new biography of Patterson is out: *R.M. Patterson: A Life of Great Adventure* by David Finch. As one would expect, it encompasses far more of Patterson's life than the few years he spent on the Nahanni. It covers his early years in England, World War I, two years homesteading in Peace River country, nearly two decades of ranching and trail-riding in the Rocky Mountains near Calgary, and another four decades as an orchardist and writer on Vancouver Island. During the latter period, Patterson returned more than once to the Nahanni and to

the remote rivers of northern British Columbia and Alberta. But the years between 1926 and 1928—Patterson's Nahanni years—constitute nearly a third of *R.M. Patterson: A Life of Great Adventure*, so Finch's book is clearly relevant to anyone with interests in the Canadian North, travel writing, adventure, or simply how one might choose to live one's life.

One of the first things Finch's biography reveals is that Patterson was able to make bold and adventurous choices about how he lived because he enjoyed the privileges of wealth. His marks at boarding school earned him entrance into Oxford, but only on the condition that his family pay the costly tuition. Patterson's mother, a continuing force even in his adult life, wrote the cheque. He successfully proved up a quarter section (160 acres) of homestead land in the Peace River region and was granted an adjacent quarter section for his military service. But while improving his properties, he was also able to make successful investments in the North American stock market—an economic advantage not available to most homesteaders. And even though he had been successful trapping on the Nahanni in the winter of 1928–29, the return on his mining investments that same winter far outstripped his profits from weasels and marten. While the family wealth on his mother's side should not cause us to discount the extraordinary choices Patterson made (no doubt, he could have developed a well-fed alderman's paunch as an employee of the Bank of England), it puts his adventures in a perspective not entirely disclosed in Patterson's own accountings. Nonetheless, a personality that can be as comfortable among the refined audience of a London opera house as it is with poorly educated trappers has an appeal of its own.

One of the most interesting features of *A Life of Great Adventure* is the perspective it forces one to take toward *The Dangerous River*. When we read Patterson's great story of adventure on the Nahanni, we tend to forget the art that lies behind the scenes. Such forgetfulness is easy, given the compelling immediacy with which Patterson writes. His style puts the reader beside him in the canoe, perhaps stowed somewhere amid tarps and bags of oatmeal, so that one becomes lost in dreaming about the adventure. Few of us think about the more than two decades that intervened between Patterson's 1926–28 experiences on the Nahanni and the publication of *The Dangerous River* in 1954. Writers, whether of fiction or nonfiction, however, create texts, not experience, and those intervening years had a clear influence on the account Patterson created.

Finch's book brings to the surface numerous matters of fact about Patterson's time on the Nahanni that remind us of the highly constructive nature of the author's task. Interestingly, Finch's primary sources for these occasionally contradictory facts are accounts penned not by other writers, but by Patterson himself: diary entries and letters he wrote during or immediately after the period spent on the Nahanni. In particular, Finch draws on letters written

home to “Mother.” These sources provide a somewhat different perspective from the recollections packaged in book form 26 years later. Finch does not dwell on such differences. *A Life of Great Adventure* is not that sort of study, although it might well inspire a more scholarly probing in that vein. Finch does, nonetheless, point out the direction of travel.

For example, Patterson remarks in *The Dangerous River* that “nothing was shot uselessly with the exception of one mountain sheep that was swept away down the rapids” (Finch, p. 96). Yet even Finch’s condensed biographical summary of Patterson’s stay on the Nahanni, derived from Patterson’s own letters and diary entries written while he was on the Nahanni or shortly afterwards, mentions numerous unfortunate situations in which animals could not be retrieved after they were killed. Usually the carcass, like the wasted mountain sheep in *The Dangerous River*, was carried away by the river’s current. At other times, the animal fell on some inaccessible rock outcropping from which recovery was impossible.

Patterson was primarily hunting for food, so the occasional less-than-certain shot was probably necessary. It is nonetheless significant that 26 years later, Patterson not only dropped any mention of such kills, but made the explicit statement that only one unfortunate animal had been lost in this way. Finch speculates, and he is likely correct, that as Patterson matured, “he rewrote the past to reflect the kind of person he would have liked to have been that summer of 1927” (p. 96).

Finch points to other differences between the events of 1926–28 and the accounting given in *The Dangerous River*. According to the biography, Patterson’s adventurous enthusiasm did not always compensate for his initial lack of canoe skills. While Patterson occasionally jokes in *The Dangerous River* about his own inexperience, Finch’s readers come to realize the considerable extent of Patterson’s controlling hand. While Patterson was willing to let the public in for a few chuckles at the “greenhorn’s” expense, there were limits to what his ego could disclose. In many ways, this understanding of Patterson’s vanity makes him more human, and hence, his accomplishments seem even more extraordinary. When we are reminded how much Patterson was like the rest of us, we are better able to appreciate the individuality and boldness with which he chose to live his life. In general, however, *A Life of Great Adventure* is a highly celebratory biography, keeping its focus largely on the accomplishments of this curious gentleman adventurer.

Anyone who has read Patterson’s books—*The Dangerous River*, *The Buffalo Head* (1961), *Far Pastures* (1963), *Trail to the Interior* (1966), and *Finlay’s River* (1968)—will already have encountered much of the biographical information Finch brings to the table. Patterson was always fond of re-creating himself in his books. *Buffalo Head*, for example, Patterson’s book about his years in the mountains southwest of Calgary, is fully one-third of the way through before it shifts to the foothills ranch. What

precedes the account of his ranching days is a history of his early family life in the north of England, his Oxford days, his service in the war, his internment in a German prisoner-of-war camp, his homesteading in the Peace River country, and his journeys to the Nahanni. While Finch certainly draws on other sources for biographical information—interviews, letters, unpublished archival documents, and the like—he obviously makes frequent use of the autobiographical accountings in Patterson’s own numerous books and magazine articles. But few readers will have read all Patterson’s books, and those interested enough to have done so will be delighted by the additional material and modest insight that *A Life of Great Adventure* brings to Patterson’s story. I say “modest” insight because, as an obvious admirer of Patterson, Finch essentially tells the story that Patterson himself would have liked to have told.

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LET HEROES SPEAK: ANTARCTIC EXPLORERS, 1772–1922. By MICHAEL H. ROSOVE. Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2000. ISBN 1-55750-967-0. xi + 358 p., maps, b&w illus., notes, bib., index. Hardbound. US\$34.95.

Since the publication of Roland Huntford’s biographies, *Scott and Amundsen* (1979) and *Shackleton* (1985), there has been a renewal of interest in the Antarctic exploratory expeditions of the early 20th century. It has taken the form of new editions of the South Polar classics of the period and the posthumous publication of edited diaries of several of the participants. As a result, many general readers might be left with the impression that the discovery and exploration of the Antarctic continent were very much a British and Norwegian affair.

Michael Rosove’s book does much to place these better-known expeditions in a wider historical context and introduce to the generalist the important contributions of Russian, American, French, Scottish, Belgian, Swedish, German, and Australian mariners, scientists, sealers, and explorers.

Important earlier histories of Antarctic exploration are the second section of Clements Markham’s *The Lands of Silence* (1921)—which rather naturally concentrates on Robert Scott’s two expeditions, which the author, as President of the Royal Geographic Society, sponsored—and Hugh Mill’s more detailed *The Siege of the South Pole* (1905). Subsequent histories include those of Hayes (1932), which covers the years from 1906 to 1931, and Quartermain (1967), which is a comprehensive history of the Ross Sea sector. Rosove gives ample credit to Mill as the first major historian of the region. *Let Heroes Speak*, which covers the century and a half from James Cook’s first foray into